



Photo by TSgt Ben Bloker

Riders

By MSgt Ty Foster, Peterson AFB, Colo.

Why don't they think?

Last year, I wrote an article about motorcycle safety titled, "What were they thinking?" I should have called it, "Why weren't they thinking?"

For as many years as I have been a rider, even longer, I have been concerned about motorcycle safety.

Two months before I bought my first bike, a motorcycle passed me on the right as I was turning right. As his bike crashed into the side of my parents' 1970 Chevy pickup, everything began moving in slow motion. He flew 30 feet through the air right over the hood of the truck. Two other motorcyclists, waiting to turn at the intersection, watched in dismay as this human projectile hurled toward them and his mangled bike careened their way.

He landed face-up and unconscious underneath the nearest bike and his right leg had a gash so severe I thought it had been severed. Pulling the bike off of him, I looked at his helmetless head. His face, cut by my rearview mirror, was lacerated from the top of his forehead to the tip of his nose. Blood pooled over his closed eyes.

His motorcycle ended up in the ditch 10 feet away. The can of beer that had been between his legs as he began his impatient pass was in the grass near my parents' truck. His name, I had learned, was Ricky, and he was alive.

I met him, under better circumstances, about a year later. It had taken about 300 stitches to fix his wounds and he almost did lose his leg. He told me it wasn't my fault. He was drunk and had done a stupid thing. Why wasn't he thinking?

I was 18 years old. I am 42 now, and I can remember that wreck like it happened yesterday.

Between then and now, I have logged tens of thousands of miles on motorcycles. I have taught motorcycle safety at eight sites in two states to more than 650 people. I have written countless articles, conducted workshops, inspections, and demonstrations in an effort to stem the red tide of Air Force motorcycle deaths and injuries.

Why wasn't he thinking?

On April 10, two riders were on a divided highway with a posted speed limit of 50 kilometers per hour — that is about 31 mph. Rider No. 1 zipped between two cars at a high rate of speed. As he entered a gradual curve, his motorcycle began to lose control. He skidded for 198 feet, hit the median, was ejected from the bike, and collided with an oncoming vehicle. He was

dragged 30 feet and tumbled another 103 feet. Rider No. 2 watched his friend die.

Rider No. 1 had just picked his bike up from the shop where it had been in for brake problems resulting from a result of a previous mishap. He had attended motorcycle safety training about 18 months earlier.

Why weren't they thinking?

Another Air Force rider and his buddy were out for a ride May 24, on a new road. There were no street lights, minimal street markings, and neither rider had driven it before. At a speed in excess of 60 mph — posted 45 mph — an unannounced curve sneaked up on them. Rider No. 1 applied his brakes hard. Rider No. 2 swerved around rider No. 1 who then struck the curb and went airborne. Two hundred twenty-two feet later the dust began to settle on the mangled bike. This rider No. 2 also watched his friend die. Neither rider was wearing the required protective gear.

He flew 30 feet through the air and right over the hood.

Why didn't they think?

On June 1, an Air Force motorcyclist with a passenger was doing about 120 mph in a 60-mph zone down a divided four-lane highway. Approaching a curve, the front tire left the pavement edge. They crashed in the grass median and were launched about 500 feet. The operator lived but the passenger suffered traumatic head injuries and later died. They had been at a party, then went on a beer run while the designated drivers were taking people home. Neither wore the required protective gear.

Unfortunately, more will die.

I would recount more of these tragic losses, but it makes me sick to read them, to envision their final realities. Last year ACC lost 9 airmen in fatal motorcycle crashes.

But it hasn't worked.

I have realized there is no panacea, no cure-all to eliminate the deaths of Air Force motorcyclists. As involved in their rider's lives as supervisors and commanders can be, they can't be expected to make every decision for them. It is on the rider. For when riders decide to straddle their bikes, start them, shift into gear and roll onto the road, they have accepted the risk and the responsibility for whatever may occur. Their split-second decision to speed up, slow down, swerve or not to ride after a drink of alcohol is in their hands — or, rather it is in their heads.

Some people think we motorcyclists have an attitude. I think they are right. I just wish the attitude every one of us had involved safety. "Safety is an attitude — get one!" If they had, they would probably live to ride a lot longer. ▶